

Editorial

'Of First Importance': The non-negotiables

If we know where we are going our chances of arriving there are greatly increased and if we know what we believe our chances of communicating that effectively are also greatly increased. Looking at the church scene in Scotland today it is difficult to avoid the feeling that such words as vagueness and muddle rather than clarity are appropriate. There is defeatism rather than vision; parochialism rather than a wide and generous listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches; and management of decline rather than pioneer work for the kingdom. The emphasis of this editorial is that the Lord has given us all that we need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1: 3) and that in the Gospel we have the power which grows the church and converts the world.

I want to concentrate on what Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3 describes as 'of first importance'; that message which changed his

life and which it is now his life's work to pass on to others. This was early in his ministry, but we find the same conviction at the end as he urges Timothy to preach that same Gospel and to pass it on to the next generation. How this is done in terms of methods, techniques and strategies, which will vary from generation to generation and from place to place, is a secondary issue. Paul insists in Romans 1: 16 that the Gospel word is not something accompanied by the power of God but is itself that power and thus nothing can be more important than unleashing that word and believing that by the power of the Spirit it will do its appointed work.

The first non-negotiable is the authority of Scripture. This is not setting a book above Christ himself but ensuring that the Christ we believe in is the Biblical Christ and not a fantasy. This means that the Bible will

CONTENTS

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | Editorial |
| 5 | On the dangers of Christian shorthand: 'Word Ministry' |
| | <i>Christopher Ash</i> |
| 9 | A Pattern for Mission in a Hostile World |
| | <i>William J. U. Philip</i> |
| 18 | Basic Kingdom Principles: The Power and Priority of Preaching |
| | <i>Robin Sydserff</i> |
| 24 | Bob Fyall interviews |
| | <i>Agnes Brough</i> |
| 26 | Preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ |
| | <i>Bob Fyall</i> |
| 29 | Book Reviews |

If we begin with God, other things will fall into their right place

govern our preaching and our living including every aspect of our church lives. Its teaching will shape not only our Sunday services but our business meetings and our administration. In 1 Corinthians Paul says that if we want to understand the great saving events we must read the Bible and he makes a similar point to Timothy; in both cases the primary reference is to the Old Testament and by implication to the apostolic writings then coming together.

But all that is the common currency of Evangelicalism and probably would cause little disagreement. But simply saying we believe this is not enough. We need to go on to Paul's other emphasis in both these passages. In the Corinthians passage Paul emphasises that this is not simply a statement to be believed but a Gospel to be preached; a Gospel which saves and which transforms. In 2 Timothy he speaks of Scripture's power to teach and train, and Timothy is urged to preach at all times and in all places. The authority of the Bible is not an abstract idea to be debated and analysed, it is rather the assurance that in this book we hear the voice of God. We stand on this but we need to be the

clay jars which contain the treasure and share that with others.

A common theme today is that we need to understand post-modernism, multi-faith issues, globalisation and the like or we shall not be able to speak to our generation. Two assumptions underlie this. The first is that no other generation has had problems like ours in communicating the faith, which is surely an example of what C. S. Lewis called 'chronological snobbery', the idea that our age is not an age like all others but an objective platform from which we can survey all other times and patronise them. Post-modernism is at least as old as the closing chapters of Judges. What Paul encountered at Athens was multi-culturalism with a vengeance in the form of a bewildering array of gods, nationalities and lifestyles. And a Gospel which is specifically directed to all nations must be the message for globalisation. What we need is not more and more studies of these matters but people who can preach the Gospel in all these and many other situations.

The other assumption is that preaching, especially expository preaching, does not connect

with these and other issues in the 'real' world. There is of course bad preaching, there is boring preaching and there are sermons which are simply exegetical lectures without application. No one denies that. The reality is, however, that those most committed to expository preaching work very hard at application. They are almost always people who take a keen interest in news and current affairs programmes; usually read widely both in literature and biography and the like and use all these resources to help to convey the timeless message in ways which people can understand.

The trouble about beginning with the culture rather than the Bible is that we then deal only with felt needs and deal with these badly because we are starting from the wrong place. If we begin with God other things will fall into their right place. We need to trust the Bible to be the Bible and to do all the things that Paul says to Timothy. If we unleash the word we can expect these things to happen. People will be transformed, will grow and will learn to recognise truth and error. Since the word also rebukes there will be resentment and hostility, people will leave and often say malicious things about us. The vital thing is to be faithful to the Bible and leave the results to God.

Paul says to Timothy 'fulfil your ministry' and that is to be a Bible-teaching ministry which will involve training others.

The non-negotiable doctrine of the authority of Scripture is not simply an intellectual idea, it is the mainspring of all true Gospel work. That does not mean that the Bible saves us, rather that in it we hear the voice of the Son of God and that life-giving word leads to new birth (see 1 Pet. 1: 23). So we turn now to the other non-negotiable that Paul speaks of which is the living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

What does it mean to preach Christ and for our ministries to be like that of John Wesley who summed up his own ministry in the words 'I offered Christ to them'? How do we preach the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ without reducing every sermon to two ways to live? We shall look again at the Corinthians and Timothy passages and see there five principles to guide us as we proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Preach the Biblical Christ

'Christ died' says Paul and already that is more than a historical statement. He is saying that the long-promised Jewish Messiah has appeared and fulfilled the Old Testament. Timothy is reminded of the sacred writings he read as a child which led him to faith in Christ. These Scriptures have the pattern of death and resurrection writ large. Adam and Eve expelled from Eden come under a death sentence but with the promise of a rescuer.

The vital thing is to be faithful to the Bible and leave the results to God

Enoch and Elijah are taken to heaven. The death of Joseph in Egypt, which also symbolises the death of his people in Egypt, is followed by the Exodus, which is a picture of Christ as the new and greater Moses leading his people beyond death to the promised land (see Luke 9:31). The new death of the Exile is followed by restoration, which points to the new creation. This is what it means to preach Christ from the Old Testament. This will involve exploring the diverse genres of Biblical literature and seeing the profound unity of many diverse writings. As we preach Esther, Nahum and the Song of Songs we are preaching the Gospel.

Preach real events

The Gospel is rooted in time and space and is a message for all who live in these twin dimensions. The opening verses of the Bible establish that: God created the physical order and he also created time –whatever else the seven days mean they certainly mean that. Yet to people like that, people like us, the Gospel comes from beyond space and time with a message about eternity. The death of Jesus was no myth; that is emphasised by two details. The first is the

burial, which is featured in all four Gospels and shows that a real death had happened. The second is that the resurrection is also a physical event happening on a specific day. This will anchor our preaching in real life and deal with real concerns.

Preach Christ as our substitute

The fact that Christ died is not in itself a gospel; that is expressed in the phrase 'for our sins'. The doctrine of penal substitution is under attack in evangelical circles and dismissed as crude and barbarous. But to remove that is not a game for theologians, rather it destroys the very heart of the Gospel and is not only theologically wrong but pastorally disastrous. We are left with no hope for the guilty, no assurance for the frightened and no hope for the despairing. Unless Christ took our place we are still under God's anger (see Ps. 90:7-8). There must be clarity on this subject or we will lose the Gospel.

Preach Christ's present work

As we look into the Bible we find that it provides words for daily living; think of books like Proverbs or Romans 12-15 where the great Biblical truths come right

into our daily lives. We need to learn to think with the mind of Christ, which is to think Biblically. When we truly honour Christ we do not simply believe theoretically in the words of the Bible, we accept them as shaping our living. This is behind the different words that Paul uses to Timothy and develops what he means by 'making you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus'. As we learn and teach the mind of Christ many different things will be happening. There will always have to be rebuke because sinful people, even when forgiven, do not always think as God thinks. There will be correction as false and muddled thinking is exposed. There will be challenge and encouragement. None of this depends on the preacher, rather on the Spirit taking the written word and leading people to the living Word.

Preach the Christ who will come in Glory

The resurrection is more than the event on the third day, it is the guarantee that the judgment will come and that there is an irreversible movement towards the new creation.

The future belongs to Christ and as the Gospel is preached and people respond the kingdom is extending. Paul, speaking perhaps only weeks before his own death, sees the coming of Christ, the righteous judge, as the true goal of his ministry. We need to live in the light of the future to remain faithful in the present.

Paul sees this again as far more than a belief in his description of this as 'loving his appearing'.

Of course there is more that a Christian leader will do than read and teach the Bible and this editorial in no way denies that. But if we fail here nothing else we do, however accomplished or brilliant, will have lasting significance. The Bible must have the controlling voice in all our activities. If it does not and simply becomes another resource the church will not long remain evangelical. We are always in danger of two opposite errors which both the apostles and the prophets before them warn us against. One is the Gospel minus – the way of liberalism: the denial of the power of God, the sufficiency of Scripture and the divinity of Jesus. When that happens, churches become simply social gatherings without any sense of God. Preachers are thrown back on their own resources and have to resort to entertainment of various kinds to get a hearing from largely ageing congregations. That kind of watered-down version of the Gospel never wins any new hearts and, in spite of often being called liberating, has largely emptied the churches.

The other is the Gospel plus – the way of legalism, which puts something else alongside Jesus. Before long that other thing, whether it be church order, inherited ways of running meetings, the outdated lifestyle of an earlier generation or the new way

of doing church which is a *sine qua non* of success, becomes as important as the Gospel and then more important than the Gospel. When people truly listen to Christ in his Word there will be deep unity over the non-negotiables and gracious compromises over secondary issues (see Rom. 14 and 15).

Since this is my last editorial I wanted to outline the vital importance of loyalty to the fundamentals of the Gospel and commitment to these shaping our preaching and our living. The other articles in different ways bear on that. My great desire is to see flourishing Gospel churches throughout the land and beyond. Such churches, like those in Thessalonica have 'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven (1 Thes. 1:9-10). Each of us has a part to play in this and we need to be open and willing to hear God's voice and follow where he leads us.

On the dangers of Christian shorthand: 'Word ministry'

Christopher Ash, Director, The Cornhill Training Course, London, UK

'Word ministry' has become something of a catchphrase in evangelical circles. We say things like, 'I hope to be involved in word ministry', or 'My work is Bible-teaching ministry'. Sometimes we refer to members of a church's staff as 'the Bible-teaching staff' to distinguish them from, perhaps, the administrative staff.

This is a very helpful shorthand in some respects. We use it in the Cornhill Training Course where we want, under God, to equip men to preach, and to involve men and women in the ministry of the word of God in all sorts of circumstances. This shorthand makes it clear that the work of the pastor-teacher (like those who do related ministries that involve the teaching of the Bible) is not fundamentally a sacramental work, administering the grace of God through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Sup-

per. Nor is it, at heart, a work of strategic leadership in which the core need is for 'ministry skills' – an understanding of principles of church growth or church planting, etc. Nor is their work the ministry of the so-called 'worship leader', if this is defined in terms of being 'gifted to lead people into the presence of God'. Nor is their work the work of a counsellor or amateur psychiatrist. Nor is their work the work of the skilled and charming manager of a voluntary society, keeping the club happy and harmonious by his enviable 'people skills'. No, the fundamental ministry of the pastor-teacher is to serve the church of Christ by serving and preaching the word of Christ (Col. 1:23, 25) because it is by this word that the church is brought into existence and is built up (e.g. 1 Pet. 1:23-25). A pastor-teacher is a servant of the word or he is nothing.

But there is one serious danger with this shorthand. 'The ministry of the word' is shorthand for 'prayer and the ministry of the word'. The work of the pastor-teacher is to speak to God first for people and, only in that context, to speak to people for God. A pastor-teacher who speaks to people for God without speaking to God for people may seem on the outside to be a faithful minister, but he is, in fact, a fraud. Let me try to persuade you of this by tracing what we may call 'the double pattern of Christian ministry' through three stages:

1. The double pattern of prophetic ministry

It is generally assumed that the primary work of a prophet was to speak the words of God to people. Although his work may have included (and sometimes did include) predictions of

the future, fundamentally the prophet's work was to be the mouthpiece of God. So God put his words into the mouth of the prophet who then, without distorting them, faithfully spoke those words to the people.

This is true. But we can easily miss that, alongside that ministry of preaching, there runs, like a golden thread through the Old Testament, a parallel and inseparable ministry which is the ministry of intercession. Abraham was a prophet. He's explicitly called that in Genesis 20:7. And because Abraham was a prophet, Abimelech could be confident that Abraham would pray for him. Abraham the prophet interceded for Sodom (Gen. 18:22-33).

Moses the prophet, who spoke the words of God to the people, interceded for them again and again – at the time of the golden calf incident (Exod. 32:11-14, 30-32), at times of judgement in the wilderness (Num. 11:2; 14:13-19; 21:7), and on Aaron's behalf (Deut. 9:20). The one whom the Lord knew face to face (Deut. 34:10) was thereby equipped to speak to God for the people, just as he was empowered to speak to the people for God.

Samuel the prophet interceded for the people (1 Sam. 7:8-9). He understood that, for him as their prophet, not to pray for them would be a sin (1 Sam. 12:19-23). This was not a general obligation, as if every believer must pray for every other believer,

without exception; that would be a heavy burden to bear! No, it is the specific obligation of the prophet to pray for the people whom he serves and to whom he speaks the words of God.

The critical moment of the great confrontation between Yahweh and Baal on Mount Carmel was not when Elijah the prophet spoke to the people for God, but when he spoke to God for the people (1 Kgs 18:36-37). We see the same double pattern in his relations with the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17-24). Similarly, Elisha interceded for the Shunammite's son (2 Kgs 4:32-37); Job, who is certainly associated with the prophets in James 5:10-11 and who spoke rightly of God in Job 42:7, prayed for his friends in Job 42:8-9; Isaiah interceded at Hezekiah's request, as though doing so was a natural and well-understood part of his ministry (2 Kgs 19:4); Jeremiah was specifically told not to intercede in a way that makes it clear that, without this prohibition, he would have naturally interceded, for this was a well-understood part of the prophetic task (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11)^[1]; Ezekiel interceded in Ezekiel 11:13; Amos interceded in Amos 7:2, 5; and Daniel interceded in Daniel 9.

Incidentally, we also see this double pattern of ministry in the symbolic priestly intercession of Aaron as he bore the names of the tribes before the Lord (Exod. 28:12). And both Nehemiah individually and the people

corporately engaged in such intercession (Neh. 1:4-11; 9).

The prophet's ministry was most certainly to be God's mouthpiece – to speak to the people for God – but, equally and inseparably, it carried with it the expectation that he would speak to God for the people in intercessory prayer.

2. The double pattern of Jesus' ministry

This double pattern of prophetic ministry is fulfilled in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, our great prophet and priest. For, as the prophet who was (and is) so much more than a prophet, just as he spoke to people words that never a human being spoke before, so also he interceded for his people with an intercession that transcended and fulfilled all the intercession of the prophets beforehand.

Satan asked to sift Peter like wheat. What was Jesus' response? He prayed for him (Luke 22:31-32). If we wonder what and for whom Jesus prayed in his times of prayer in the gospels, we must surely take his great prayer of John 17 as a pointer to at least part of the answer. Just as he spoke to us from the Father, so also he spoke in intercessory prayer to the Father for us.

3. The double pattern of apostolic ministry

In Acts 6 the apostles famously make clear that the priority of their specific, apostolic ministry was to preach the word of God

(Acts 6:2). They testified to the resurrection of Jesus – that in the resurrection he was declared both Lord and Christ. This word of God – the word of the Lord Jesus, the gospel – was what they must preach. And they were not to let any other ministry distract them from this.

But when they restated this priority in verse 4, they expanded the shorthand: 'But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word'. I take it that this expansion is no accident; it arises from a deep scriptural understanding of this great double pattern. If they were to proclaim to people the word of God, they must – inescapably and as an equal priority – devote themselves to interceding to God for the people to whom they spoke for God. If they, as proclaimers of the word, did not intercede for the people to whom they proclaimed, it would be just as much a sin against God as it would have been for Samuel the prophet.

We see this intercession wonderfully lived out in the prayers of the Apostle Paul for the churches to whom he wrote. Even as he spoke to them the words of God in his letters, at the same time he interceded for them again and again (e.g. Rom. 1:9-10; 10:1; Eph. 1:15-16; Phil. 1:3-11; Col. 1:3, 9-14; 1 Thes. 1:2; 2 Thes. 1:11-12; Phlm. 4, 6).

However there is one important difference between apostolic intercession under the new cov-

enant and prophetic intercession under the old. The principle for both was that of James 5:16 – that only a man who is righteous will be heard by God. Under the old covenant particular people such as Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, could intercede, but other people could not. But, under the new covenant the whole thing has become mutual so that, as well as offering intercession on behalf of others, the apostolic writers also asked that intercession be made on their behalf (Rom. 15:30; 2 Cor. 1:11; Col. 4:3-4; 1 Thes. 5:25; 2 Thes. 3:1; cf. Heb. 13:18). Intercession is no longer a one-way mediatorial role, but rather a two-way process in which those who intercede also ask for intercession for themselves.

We may now move on from this great double pattern of prophetic ministry, of Jesus' ministry and of apostolic ministry, to the double pattern of Christian pastoral ministry.

4. The double pattern of Christian pastoral ministry: prayer and the ministry of the word

We can certainly say today that, in general, Christians ought to pray for one another (e.g. Eph. 6:18). But can we also say that there is a specific and particular obligation on pastors to pray for those in their pastoral charge? I think we can. Certainly, in the New Testament, it was not just the apostles who prayed for

Christians; Epaphras struggled in prayer on behalf of the Colossian Christians (Col. 4:12-13).

Although the Christian pastor-teacher is not a prophet or an apostle, the shape of his ministry is, in important respects, apostolic and prophetic. That is, he carries on the tradition of faithfully passing on to others the apostolic preaching of Christ (e.g. 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2:2). He is to speak as one who utters the very words of God in the face of opposition and hostility, just as the prophets did (1 Pet. 4:11). He is to be faithful, not distorting his message to please his hearers, but speaking the words that God has given him in Scripture. And if his ministry is prophetic and apostolic in shape, surely we may also say that it takes on this double pattern. It would be unthinkable that the Christian pastor-teacher is now relieved of this obligation to intercede for those to whom he preaches. The point is not that he alone can pray for them (in a mediatorial sense, as under the Old Covenant) for they can pray as well as he can. Rather, he cannot pastor them authentically without praying for them faithfully. Intercession is a necessary and integral part of his pastoral office. If he does not pray, he cannot pastor, no matter how perfect the sermons he preaches.

This calling to intercession has been taken seriously again and again in the history of the church. Martin Luther famously said, 'I have so much business,

I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer'. Examples from great Christian biographies could be multiplied. However, rather than measuring prayer in hours and minutes (which would lead to discouragement), we do well to accept this work as God's call in our lives to the circumstances in which we live with the strength we are given. A heart for prayer that develops habits of prayer is of far greater importance than measuring minutes of prayer.

We must take with great seriousness this obligation. For if we do, it will have three benefits:

(a) It will preserve us from an impersonal and functional concept of 'word ministry'. Just as the apostles proclaimed Christ in order that men and women would be drawn into fellowship with them, as well as with the Son and the Father (1 John 1:3-5), so are we to preach as those who long to be in fellowship with those to whom we preach. Our preaching is not an impersonal job we do, that we may emerge from the study to go into the pulpit, deliver our polished sermon and then retreat. No, it is a task done in the context of passionate intercession for those to whom we preach. The more we remember this, the more our churches will be relational as well as functional.

(b) It will enable us to teach, since the ability to teach is relational as much as it is intellectual. No man is able to teach

unless he loves the people whom he teaches. I used to think that the aptitude of teaching was primarily an intellectual quality – the ability to understand Scripture accurately and then to convey its truth with clarity (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24). But the context in which the word is used in 2 Timothy 2 makes it clear that the aptitude of teaching includes the disposition to love the people we are teaching – even, indeed especially, when they are difficult and recalcitrant!

And if we intercede for our people, we will love them. The systematic, deliberate determination to pray for the people to whom we preach will also work in us a heartfelt love for them, so that we will hold them in our hearts and find ourselves loving them with the affection that is in Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:7-8). And this will enable us to teach them.

(c) It will promote a humble dependence upon God and protect us from pride in our preaching. Every time we intercede for our hearers, we drive home the point to our own hearts that the struggle in which we are engaged is a spiritual struggle – that our eloquence (if we have any), our ability to 'get Scripture right' (if we do) and our clarity in getting the message across (if we succeed) are of no value unless and until God works sovereignly by his Spirit to open the hearts and ears of us and our hearers so that they may hear and obey. We will cry to him, not because we have been told to (e.g. by an article

in *The Briefing*), but because we know that, until and unless he works, our work is in vain.

In his *Lectures to my Students*, Charles Spurgeon speaks vividly of the minister who limps along like a lame man with unequal legs, 'for his praying is shorter than his preaching'.^[2] Let us who are involved with 'word ministry' resolve never to forget the second leg of that ministry – the ministry of intercessory prayer for our hearers.

Endnotes

^[1] Jeremiah's intercessory role reappears in Jeremiah 37:3 and 42:2.

^[2] Charles Spurgeon, 'Lecture III: *The Preacher's Private Prayer*', *Lectures to my Students*, Marshall Pickering, London, 1989 (1954), p. 48.

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A Pattern for Mission in a Hostile World

A Sermon on Nehemiah

William J. U. Philip

Although this address was given to a particular congregation what is said is of much wider significance and deserves a wider audience. The spoken form has been largely retained.

I want us to think about *a pattern for mission in a hostile world*. At our Annual Meeting we were looking forward and thinking about a vision for mission here together in St George's-Tron. I want to restate some of that, and focus our minds upon this task that we share together as missionaries in Glasgow. There are only really two questions that we need to ask concerning mission: **What is our task?** (in other words, we need a *vision* for what our mission is) and, secondly, **how do we go about it?** (that is, we need a *pattern* for mission).

We have talked quite a bit about our vision, and what that means, but I want to reiterate that just so that we are absolutely clear. We need to because today there is an awful lot of waffle about 'discerning what God is saying to the Church today'. Have you

heard people saying that sort of thing – 'we need to discern what the Spirit is saying to us; what God wants of us today'? I want to reassure you that there is no need for us to do any such thing, because God is saying the same thing to his Church today as he has been saying to his Church always, all through history. What God is saying to his Church is what he 'once and for all delivered to the saints', as Jude says in the New Testament. And he has written it clearly for us so we don't have to be the slightest bit vague and questioning today. He tells us that our task is to be *building the kingdom of Jesus Christ*.

That is very simple and it means – according to Paul and the other apostles, according to the commands to Timothy, which are the commands for the Church

in every age after the apostles – essentially three things. It means *proclamation of the Gospel*: 'preach the Word' again and again, Paul says to Timothy. Why does he say that? Because the Gospel is the power of God for salvation. It means *preservation of the truth of the Gospel*: 'Guard the truth', Paul says again and again – why? Well, you must guard the truth of the Gospel or there will be no Gospel to preach. And, thirdly, he says *you must do all of this despite persecution*: 'endure suffering', he says again and again, and that is something that we are beginning to see increasingly even in our western world as our culture increasingly rejects the Lord Jesus Christ. So we don't need to ask ourselves what our vision for mission is. It's very clearly set out for us in Scripture. All we need to ask ourselves is – Where are

we placed? What opportunities do we have to do these things? What are *our* specific responsibilities in regard to all of this?’

Challenges and Responsibilities

I have found it helpful to think about these responsibilities under just two headings for us here in St George's-Tron. The first is that we're *surrounded by unbelievers*; quite literally here we are in the city centre, with tens—hundreds—of thousands of people passing our front door every week. We, therefore, must have great responsibilities, mustn't we, for *evangelism*, making Christ known in the city centre – and throughout this city, because you live all over the place in this city! So we are surrounded by unbelievers but, secondly, we are *surrounded by Christians*, by believers, especially by young people, young students all round us in the city centre here. People who need training and teaching. The whole wider Church in our land is desperate for teachers, for evangelists, for church planters. These needs are clear and urgent; we don't have to go searching for what God is saying to the Church today; it is perfectly plain! What we need is, therefore, to train and to teach and to push out teachers, evangelists and church planters and pastors. We don't need to wait for some special sense of call for what our job is going to be here; it's as plain as the nose on your face if we are responding to Scripture.

So that is our task—building the kingdom of Christ, building for God today. That means, building for spiritual reformation of Christ's Church and it means growing Christ's Church right here in Glasgow and in Scotland and beyond; it's simple and very straightforward. Of course, the reality is that we live in an increasingly hostile culture and society, don't we? Our culture hates the message of Christ and of Scripture. It is very interesting, isn't it; I don't know if you have been listening at all to the radio or the television and the comments about the death of the Pope. They are very happy – the commentators and people from all ends of the spectrum – to venerate the man and his charisma and his 'spirituality'. But they are very vicious against some of the things where the Pope has stood out clearly on issues which are indeed biblical. Matters of sexual morality, things to do with abortion and so on. They don't like that one little bit. We live in an increasingly hostile culture and yet we are being called to build the kingdom of Jesus Christ. So how do we go about this?

Pattern of Mission

Well, I want to talk about a pattern for mission, a pattern for building Christ's kingdom in the face of the kind of fierce opposition that we face today. Paul says, in Ephesians 6, that our opposition is not just the flesh but it's from the world, the flesh and the Devil, and the whole

book of Nehemiah is a very wonderful insight into exactly this. It is not just a wonderful story, an exciting narrative, but it gives very graphic examples of exactly the same task that you and I are involved in today. Not because it is about building walls and physical structures and so on—that's to miss the whole point of the book. Nehemiah *is* a builder but he is a builder for *God*, he's building the *kingdom* of Christ. His whole task is to build for the future of God's people and to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. That's why he takes them back to the land and builds the walls and makes them again a worshipping, covenanted people. It's all, ultimately, so that the Christ could come!

Well, our task is exactly the same. We are building the same kingdom: not preparing for Christ's first coming, but we are very clearly preparing for the coming of our Lord Jesus in power and glory. Nehemiah would have heartily endorsed Paul's words to the Ephesian church, 'We do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places' (Eph. 6:12). Therefore, he says, 'take up the full armour of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day and having done all to stand firm'.

We all know the story of Nehemiah don't we? He was cup-bearer for the king Artaxerxes in

Persia, as we read, but he had a great vision for Jerusalem and for rebuilding the walls which had previously been ruined. He had a vision for taking on the task that Ezra had begun with the first return of the exiles. So he goes to Jerusalem and he builds these walls: It is an extraordinary story, amidst the most intense and ongoing opposition, but he reconstitutes Israel once again as a covenant people of God, distinct in their own land, distinct in the face of the pagan nations. It's a triumph of faith in the face of the most extraordinary opposition. If you read in the book of Daniel you'll see that in chapters 9 and 10 Daniel sees visions in the spiritual realm that speak about what Nehemiah actually faces on earth! Jerusalem would be rebuilt, he was told by the angel, but 'in times of trouble'. The whole thing that he saw was described as 'a great war': many battles and, of course, that is exactly what the New Testament tells us we are engaged in today. That's what Paul tells us again and again: we are fighting many battles, we are building the kingdom in the face of great spiritual opposition.

So, what is the pattern for mission in the face of great spiritual opposition? That is a vital question for us as a congregation, is it not? In everything we do, not just in physical building – and we were talking on Wednesday about a proposed building project to renovate this building that we might realise our mis-

sion for the city centre here more effectively. But it is very important in our whole task of building the kingdom of Christ in the place that God has set us here in Glasgow. We are at the heart of a city centre, at the heart of a city, at the heart of a nation. What's the pattern for our mission to be?

Four Principles of Mission

Well, I want to put before you this morning four key principles that I think in Scripture always make up the pattern of truly biblical mission and I think we see them illustrated very clearly in the book of Nehemiah.

1. Scripture

The first one is very simple – *Scripture*. The book of Nehemiah begins with the effect of Scripture on this man himself. Chapter 1 shows us a man whose mind and heart is shaped by Scripture. His whole motivation is to do what God has said he has promised to do in his Scripture, in his Word. He wants to do with God *what God has said he'll do* through his people in his land. In 1:5 he prays, 'O God who keeps his covenant'. In 1:8 'Remember', he says, 'the word you gave to Moses'. Nehemiah is led in all his thinking by what God has *revealed in his Word*.

We see it in chapter 8 when Nehemiah's very first priority, after the walls have been completed and the people are safe inside the city, is to take the people right back to the Scriptures.

Just look at chapter 8 – a magnificent chapter. Here we have the entire people of God gathered in submission to Scripture:

All the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.... And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen'.... They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. (Neh. 8:1-8)

Hear is Ezra reading the Law, expounding the Law, explaining the Law, and then others too going and teaching that to one another. You see from verse 13 it goes on a second day, and then day after day! 'And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God' (18). The same

thing in 9:3, 'And they stood in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day', that is, the twenty-fourth day of doing that! All the way through the book of Nehemiah we find Scripture is at the heart. Scripture remains the bedrock of the whole reformation that he effected, to correct them, to rebuke them and to encourage them and to instruct them.

(a) Need to Teach the Bible

It is worth just noticing here that this is a people, an *untaught* people, who did not know the Scriptures. They had been in exile in Babylon and Persia and in an alien culture, and were coming back now to a totally new culture that they had never experienced, a pagan culture, a very 'post-modern culture' indeed – full of different religions, different cultures, all sorts of things around them. And so what was Nehemiah's strategy?

'Well, now that we have got the walls built, we are going to have a three-week course on post-modernism. We are going to sit down and learn about all these other people's religions. We are going to learn about modern culture, we are going to do all these things that are so essential now the world is so different.'

Is that what he did? No! his strategy was to build a pulpit for Ezra and they spent day after day after day reading and explaining and prosecuting and understanding *Scripture*.

Notice it was *all* the people. Did you notice that? Verse 3, the men and the women *and all the children*, all those who could understand. It is a very interesting study to look through the family services of the Bible. You find they are not usually to do with conjurers bringing things out of hats or people dancing around like idiots. No, it is all about teaching children and adults Scripture. All the people all together. It is very reminiscent of Paul's Epistles as Paul went around the ancient world. He wrote his letters to the churches, lost of instructions there to children too – 'Children obey your parents'. All God's people needing all God's Word. And, all doing so together.

Notice also he *didn't* say, 'Well now, of course, times have moved on since we left the land, and culture's moved on and we are not in a very literate age now, we are not in a *word* culture, we are in a *vision* culture. Look at all these pagans, they have got their fancy ceremonies, they've got their bright colours, they've got their dancing and all the rest of it, so let's get rid of Scripture, we're going to have videos; we're going to have a visual culture now too'. No, he *didn't* say that, he built a pulpit and he taught the people Scripture.

Neither did he say, 'Look, we can't take it any more; people's attention's spans have got very short; people have got very ignorant; we've been away and they don't know the Bible; they've got

no Bible background like they used to have in the culture; we can't assume any knowledge, so, therefore, we've got to do less, and have sound bites; they can't take it'. No, *Nehemiah thought ignorance of the Bible means you must have a strategy of making people no longer ignorant of the Bible*. It's quite straightforward really. So Nehemiah 8 was the heart, the power of the great spiritual reformation that took place. That ought not to surprise us; that's the pattern all through history: biblical history and in post-biblical history of Christ's Church.

(b) Power of Scripture

A good example of this would be the sixteenth century in the Reformation in Europe. There was a continent utterly ignorant of Scripture. They had not the Scripture in their own language; it was locked up by the priests and it was covered around by endless religious accretion and tradition, which utterly obscured the Gospel. People knew nothing about Scripture. What was the strategy? *Teach the Word, proclaim the truth!* And *that* strategy is what set the whole of Europe ablaze, brought faith to life and brought new life to the people of God.

Why is that? It is because the Bible tells us the Word of God is the power of God and, therefore, the Word of God is the power of God to *bring about salvation* and for *equipping God's people*. Do you remember 2 Timothy 3: 15-16 about all Scripture being

God-breathed? The purpose of these verses is *not* just to tell us that we should believe that; not that we should believe the Scriptures alone but that we should *put the Scriptures to work!* Paul says, 'These are the things that make you wise for salvation; these are the Scriptures that will equip you for every good work.' It is the same all the way through the Old Testament and the New.

Scripture and its teaching must shape the Church and its mission in real life, not just in theory, not just in the articles of what we believe. We have no liberty to substitute anything else as the driving force of our mission. Scripture and its proclamation begins mission; it drives mission; it powers mission. Not a magisterium; not charismatic personalities, but Scripture. Nehemiah chapter 8 is a wonderful chapter that shows how God's Word is at work among his people. Read it this afternoon and ponder it. It's just like Acts chapter 6, where, in the face of all kinds of threats to the early church, the apostles said 'The Word of God and prayer must be central'; we must not be distracted. What was the result? We read, 'The Word of God continued to increase and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved'. Scripture must be at the very centre of our vision here in St George's-Tron, not just in the car along for the ride; not just in the passenger seat but in the driving seat. Scripture is the first principle in any pattern for mission.

2. Supplication

The second is very related to it and, again, very straightforward: supplication, *prayer*. Just as in Acts 6 it is utterly inseparable from Scripture, so we see it here in Nehemiah chapter 1. The whole book begins with Nehemiah's great prayer. He is pouring out his soul before the Lord in response to Scripture. It goes on that way all through the book in the face of terrible opposition. Look at 4:4:

Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.

Isn't that very, very like the prayer in Acts 4 where the apostles are gathered together and they pray this, 'Lord look down on their threats, grant to your servants to continue to speak your Word with all boldness'. Chapter 9 has a remarkable example of corporate prayer, all the people together, all those who could understand, young and old praying together, turning to God.

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads and they separate themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from

the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshipped the LORD their God. (9:1-3)

This is prayer that is first of all seeking God and his kingdom. In other words, it's prayer for mission. That's familiar, isn't it? All the way through the New Testament we see the same thing. What did Jesus say in the Lord's prayer? What comes first? 'Your kingdom come'; a prayer for mission. All the way through the Acts, all the way through the Epistles, Paul urges people to pray that the word of God may go forth unstopped.

(a) Prayer as a Church

Why is the big emphasis on *corporate prayer* here in Nehemiah and in the New Testament – praying together as God's people? Well, one is simply practical, isn't it? It is very hard to sustain on your own praying for a whole hour-and-a-half for mission. Can you do that? I can't do that, but I can on a Wednesday night when we are all gathered together! When I've got my brothers and sisters encouraging me, I can do it, but I can't do it very well on my own. But there is a much more important reason, a theological reason. Here's God's family together; and our Father has given us the privilege of sharing in his powerful mission to the world! Read Revelation chapter 8:1-5 when you go home and see the picture there of the prayers of the saints rising up to heaven and being

hurled down upon the earth by the angels to effect God's plans and purpose. It is something he calls his whole people, his body, to be involved with. That's why it is so vital for us – *prayer and the Word go together because God's Word and his Spirit are inseparable*. The Spirit breathed out the Word which is the power of God for salvation. We must be a church at prayer: congregationally and in small groups and in triplets or whatever and individually – all these things.

(b) Prayer that Looks Outward

Is it to be inward self-focused prayer? There's a lot of prayer like that in churches today. But that's not the kind of prayer we see in the book of Nehemiah; we see upward and outward, God-focused prayer, kingdom-focused prayer. Praying in line with God's promises about his kingdom, that's what Nehemiah was doing. You see if the focus on *Scripture* reminds us that *the Gospel is the instrument* that builds God's kingdom; well the focus on *prayer* reminds us that *God's Spirit is the agent* who builds God's kingdom; it is not us; it's him. Prayer must be at the very centre of our vision in St George's-Tron; and not just in theory; all this implies individuals must actually *bodily* be doing it too!

3. Strategy

Third, *strategy*. None of this means that we are to be passive. It is quite the reverse. You get

some people who say, 'Well, we must *pray* and God will do the work.' You get others who say, 'No, no, no, we must be people of *action*.' Well, they're both wrong! Dick Lucas often says, 'The sign of God being at work is that men are at work' and that's true. Paul puts it this way in Colossians 1:29: 'I struggle [it's extraordinary] with all his energy, that he powerfully works in me'. *I'm struggling* but it's *his energy at work in me* and that's so clear all the way through Nehemiah. Look at 4:9, 'we prayed to our God' he says, *and set a guard*. Or 4:14, 'Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, *and fight*' or verse 20, '*Our God will fight for us*', he says. But, look at verse 18, the builders each had a sword strapped to his side; verse 23, weapons in his right hand. There is no conflict at all between God's sovereign work in building his kingdom and our work of evangelism and mission. Our calling is to labour with all our might to that end: with all our ingenuity, with all our planning, with all our strategy. Look at Nehemiah himself in chapter 1: he is driven by Scripture; he's moved to pray – but not just in general. In verse 11 he says, 'answer the prayer I make today'. That's a prayer for his particular plans in the face of the king. Nehemiah, you see, did seek God; *he asks God to open doors, but when God did open the doors Nehemiah was ready*. He had a *strategy*. So, when in Chapter 2 the king said, 'What do you

want Nehemiah?' He didn't say, 'Well, I'll come back to you in a fortnight, I'll go away and pray about it.' Not a chance! He knew exactly *where* he wanted to go; verse 5: 'I want to go to Jerusalem.' 'When do you want to go?' Verse 6 tells us he knew exactly *when* he wanted to go. 'How are you going to achieve it?' Well he's got that planned too, verse 7: 'I want letters of passage to get me through.' 'How are you going to finance it and furnish this thing?' He's thought of that too, Verse 8, 'I'm going to have

Scripture and its teaching must shape the Church and its mission in real life, not just in theory

letters that will give me timber so that I can build.' It's already all part of a carefully laid plan.

(a) The Bible and Prayer in Strategy

He was ready when the door was open *because* he was a man of prayer and of Scripture, not in spite of it. That's because the Bible, you see, is not a book for academics. It is not a book to be pored over in dry, dusty libraries; that's not what it's about at all. (That's why so much of our so-called training for ministry is a disaster.) The Bible is the book through which God is at work. It is an *action*

book. And so the people of the Word and prayer are people of action. Where God is at work men and women are at work.

Nehemiah had a strategy; he had a *biblical* strategy, and he refused to be distracted from that strategy. I love 6:3, don't you? 'I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should work stop while I leave it and come down to you?' All these people wanted to have ecumenical conferences with him and say 'Let's all get together and do our work together'. People in the evangeli-

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cal world are obsessed with that – 'Let's all have get-togethers and have get-together prayer meetings.' Nehemiah says, 'Look, we're doing a great work; get on with your own work. I'm doing mine.' People who really share the same gospel vision don't need to have get-togethers on the plains of Ono to negotiate endlessly about how they can work together. They just get on with it; they're doing it already. They don't need to be distracted.

God builds his kingdom through his people: people who have vision and strategy; strategy that is driven by the Gospel and

the mission of the Gospel. That's always the way and Nehemiah is a great example of it. Just think about Paul. His travels in the Acts weren't just willy-nilly all over the place. No, he had strategy; he had plans; he had dreams; he pushed open doors; he went to strategic population centres so as to evangelise whole countries. In Acts 19 we read that he stayed in Ephesus for two years preaching. The result was that from his preaching in that crucial city centre all the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord! He had strategy. He desired greatly to get to Rome, the hub of the ancient world. Why? Because the Gospel then would filter into all the ancient world.

Recently at the Proclamation Trust's Ministers' Conference I was hugely encouraged by Don Carson who was preaching through the book of Nehemiah, and especially at a comment he made along these lines:

'Just getting next Sunday's sermons ready isn't enough in ministry. That is vital, essential. But the reformation in Nehemiah's time was not *just* accomplished through Ezra, the faithful priest expounding Scripture. No, it needed also the entrepreneurial spirit of Nehemiah who had vision; who saw what needed to be done and actually made it happen.'

You see we need *Scripture*; we need *prayer* but we also need *strategy*. It is not a contradiction for us here in St George's-Tron

to say that prayer and the Word must be at the heart of everything and yet to say that we should dream dreams and have visions and formulate strategy. It's not a contradiction; real biblical thinking demands that we do *both*.

It's not just by God's Spirit through the Gospel that his kingdom is built; it's through his people, and we must be a people who preach and proclaim the Word *and* who pray *and* who actually *make things happen*; not just people of theory but of practice. God builds his kingdom through his people; when God is at work men and women are at work.

4. Service and Sacrifice

There is a fourth 's' and that is *service* or service and *sacrifice*. God builds his kingdom through his people, his church. That doesn't mean that just a few do the work and the rest look on. Kingdom-building is not a spectator sport. Ephesians 4 is very clear on this; God gives particular gifts of ministry of the Word for some in the church in order that through *their* exercise of these gifts *all* the saints are *equipped for work of ministry*; *all* attain maturity in the faith; *all* grow up in every way. And Paul says that it is when every part is doing its work that the whole body grows. But *only* when every part is doing its work.

It is wonderfully illustrated for us in Nehemiah chapter 3. It's a huge list of every person and

family who built the walls. It begins with the high priest with all his family and it goes on, verse 2, to the men of Jericho; then the sons of Hassenaah and on and on and on. Look at verse 9, Rephaiah; he was a ruler of half of Jerusalem. He got onto the walls and rolled his sleeves up. Look at verse 12, Shallum, another ruler of half the city. He built it with his daughters; think of that – it wouldn't be very good for their fingernails, would it? But there they are all on the walls together. The only blot in that whole chapter is in verse 5: The nobles of Tekoa: 'next to them the Tekoites repaired but the nobles *would not stoop to serve their Lord*.' Verse 27, interestingly, shows that the Tekoites repaired another section of the wall, perhaps an extra portion to make up.

But you see, Scripture alone is not enough; prayer alone is not enough; not even prayer-driven Scripture and strategy; there's actually got to be, on top of all of that, a *service mentality*, hasn't there? And we can be very slow to recognise this in the church. We can be very precious; we can be very taken up with ourselves. 'Oh, I want to exercise my gifts and this church does not allow me to exercise my gifts properly so I am going somewhere else'; that's what we say, isn't it? Well, I have to tell you the Bible is not interested in whether you want to exercise your gifts or not; the Bible is interested in whether you are willing to serve on the walls

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building God's kingdom with the rest of his church. The New Testament doesn't say anything anywhere about us looking into ourselves trying to recognise our own gifts and seeking them to be fulfilled. No, it tells us to look where there are *needs* and where we can *serve* and *get on with doing it*! We don't find people saying to Nehemiah, 'Oh, Nehemiah, I don't feel my gifts are really being used adequately in this place, I'd rather go off and do something else while you build.' No, they saw the walls were in ruins; they understood what had to be done, and they rolled up their sleeves and did it. That is what the *Bible* calls worship.

(a) True Worship

To worship God is not about singing or dancing, either high-brow or lowbrow; it's about *serving*. One of the commonest words (*latrueo*) is translated both 'worship' and 'serve'. That's why it is so ridiculous when people talk about 'worship styles' today. It is utterly irrelevant; worship is – more than anything else – serving. What does Paul say in Romans 12, 'Present your bodies as living sacrifices. That is your

spiritual worship' or, 'reasonable service' (depending on your translation). What Paul is saying is, 'if you understand anything about worship, it's this: presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice, serving with the people of God'. Christ's kingdom is built in Nehemiah's day, in Paul's day, in our day by *worshipping people*; that is, by churches and people who have a *serving mentality*.

But that kind of service does involve sacrifice; all true worship does; all true service does. Perhaps it means sacrificing our dignity serving below our station. What the men of Tekoa wouldn't do but Nehemiah himself did. It means a sacrifice of time and of energy and of money. It is often something that we find hardest, isn't it? Nehemiah chapter 5 shows us the great personal sacrifice that many had to make; that Nehemiah himself made, foregoing his own lands, foregoing his own servants and putting them to work on the wall instead of for his profit. And for us, if we are to pursue together our God-given mission, that will mean sacrifice, sacrifice of many things. We have got to face up to that if we are ever going to think about being a worshipping church, because we are in a warfare; we are in a spiritual battle and in a war even many good and legitimate things have to be laid aside for the sake of the war effort, isn't that so? And we don't just do it because we have to; we do it because it is infinitely worth it! The Bible is clear

the war that we are involved in building Christ's kingdom will not last forever. There's a peacetime coming; there's an eternity to enjoy! But for now we're building the kingdom of Christ in times of trouble. It's a great war and, therefore, real worship involves sacrifice. If it doesn't cost us, it's not worship. Do you remember when David wanted to build by the threshing-floor of Araunah to build the Temple on, 2 Samuel 24? 'I will not offer to the Lord my God that which cost me nothing' and although the man wanted to give him the land, he insisted on paying.

(b) Giving

One obvious tangible sacrifice is finance. That is needed to finance our ongoing mission as a congregation, and certainly, if we are going to be facing a major building project coming up before us, that will test us, won't it? It is going to cost us over two million pounds to renovate this building, to really fit it for what we need to do here. And just as Nehemiah couldn't build Jerusalem on his own or just with his leaders, we can't build the mission in St George's-Tron unless we are all willing to serve sacrificially.

In terms of a building project, well, we'll have to give a lot of money, won't we? Thousands of pounds for each of us – some of us many, many thousands of pounds. But many others have done that; that shouldn't be a concern to us. It will be a great opportunity of blessing. It's sim-

There's no place for spectators in the building project of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ

ply a matter of our view of worship, isn't it? It's simply a matter of whether we see ourselves building for the present, for the material, or building for eternity; building for what lasts. Some of us, I'm sure, would rightly be concerned about spending that large sum of money on ourselves and, indeed, it is a dangerous thing, isn't it, to spend a lot of money on ourselves. And that's why when we do this, we are going to covenant together to add a tithe – ten per cent of what we raise – and give that first tenth away to the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ in other places where they have so little compared with our plenty. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9 of that attitude that we'll be enriched in every way for such generosity. He says to us that that service not only supplies the needs of others, but abounds in thanksgiving to God. That *is* truly exciting worship!

But God builds his kingdom in every way – whether it be material things like building churches; whether it be by paying for mission; whether it be by giving time and effort and hard work and slogging for the sake of the kingdom – he builds his

kingdom through his people. And he can only do it through people who are willing to *sacrifice* and to *serve*. And that means *all* his people together. There's no place for spectators in the building project of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I keep coming back to chapter 3 verse 5, the noblemen of Tekoa who *would not stoop to serve their Lord*. That's what history records of them; that's what eternity records of them! Their contribution to the mission of the kingdom of God: they would not stoop to serve their Lord.

Friends, as we look to the future here in St George's-Tron, let us covenant together as a congregation never to be like that, but to have a sacrificing and servant attitude. Let's rather be a people of *Scripture*: shaped by the word of the Gospel; a people of *supplication*: hearts given to prayer for the kingdom of Christ; a people of *strategy*: under God making our dreams and visions into reality, making them happen; and a people of *sacrificial service*: giving of our substance and of ourselves for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Scripture, supplication, strategy, sacrificial service – that is the Bible's pattern for mission. *That's* what the Spirit is saying to the church yesterday, today and until the Lord Jesus Christ comes. The only question is whether we are listening. Amen.

Basic Kingdom Principles: The Power and Priority of Preaching (Mark 1:14-2:12)

Robin Sydserff

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The Purpose of Mark's Gospel

While the focus of this study is Mark 1:14–2:12 and the theme, ‘The Power and Priority of Preaching’, it will be helpful to set down some contextual markers, both in terms of Mark’s Gospel as a whole, and the opening section, chapters 1–4, in particular.

Mark’s Gospel has a two-fold purpose. It is a *proclamation of the gospel*, leading the hearer to respond in repentance and faith. Key points of revelation and response are Peter’s confession of Christ (8:22–30); Bartimaeus, ‘the model disciple’, who both sees clearly who Jesus is *and* follows him on the road to the

cross (10:46–52); and then the Gentile centurion who, standing at the foot of the cross, declares: ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’ (15:39b). It is striking that by the end of *Mark*, it is a blind beggar and a Gentile soldier who grasp the truth. The disciples are nowhere, confused and bewildered. And while we might be tempted to scoff at their incredulity, the truth is that their stumbling grasp of truth and priorities is often mirrored in our own lives.

As well as a proclamation of the gospel, *Mark* is a *training manual for ministry*, where Jesus prepares the disciples (and those who will follow them) for

their role in building the kingdom of God. Private seminars with the disciples are a key feature of *Mark* (e.g. 4:10–12; 7:17–23; 9:28–29; 10:10–12).

The two themes – proclamation and training – are interwoven to give the melodic line of the book. At different points one or other is given greater emphasis. At times, both harmonise in the same passage. This dual purpose is logical. It makes eminent sense that we are taught not only the message, but instructed on the method and equipped as messengers. And so we preach *Mark*, confident that God’s inspired Word will both evangelise non-believers, lead-

ing them to saving faith, and sanctify believers, training them for discipleship and ministry.

Mark 1–4: Basic Kingdom Principles

The opening section of *Mark* (chapters 1–4) sets out some basic or fundamental principles about the kingdom of God. Mark's presentation is a logical basis for dividing up the text for a sermon series. The notes which follow suggest a possible series.

(i) Focus on Jesus (1:1-13)

The Gospel begins with the focus fairly and squarely on Jesus. It is 'the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1:1b). This section functions almost like a prologue with a number of different facets bearing witness to Jesus: the witness of Scripture (vv. 2-3), prophecy (vv. 4-8), baptism (v. 9), heaven (v. 10a), the Spirit (v. 10b), the Father (v. 11), the Spirit (v. 12), Satan (v. 13a) and the angels (v. 13b).

The training theme is also evident in these opening verses. In 1:4-8, John the Baptist, who might well be described as 'the great preacher', vividly contrasts his ministry with the Lord's: 'And this was his [John's] message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit"' (1:7). There is nothing more liberating in Christian

ministry than having a clear view of what we can do (nothing) and what the Lord can do (everything)! And so the job of the Christian minister, based on the model ministry of John the Baptist, is to point people to Jesus.

(ii) Commissioned into conflict (1:9-13)

While it makes sense to take 1:1-13 together under the theme 'focus on Jesus', a distinct emphasis emerges in 1:9-13 – 'commissioned into conflict'. It might be appropriate to return to these verses, and this specific theme, as a separate study.

The voice from heaven at his baptism marks Jesus out as the servant King: 'And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."' These words evoke Psalm 2:7 (a Messianic Psalm) and Isaiah 42:1 (a Servant Song). In combination, they commission Jesus as the servant King. It is no surprise then that Jesus is immediately commissioned *into* conflict (1:12-13). What is striking from these verses is where the initiative lies. The Godhead (in the person of the Spirit) takes the fight to Satan. And nothing has changed! The church is still on the front foot, pushing back the gates of hell (Matt. 16:18b). Ultimately, Satan's attacks are reactive and always less powerful than the power of the Gospel and the capacity of the believer to endure and prevail against the opposition.

(iii) The power and priority of preaching (1:14–2:12)

In 1:14 through to 2:12 the focus is on Jesus the preacher (see detailed discussion below).

(iv) Sin, forgiveness, fellowship – the 'ABC' (2:1-17)

As we will see, it is clear from 1:14-15 that Jesus is a gospel preacher. The content of the gospel (literally the 'ABC'), is the dominant theme in 2:1-17. An appropriate title for this section would be 'sin, forgiveness, fellowship': sin is humanity's greatest problem; forgiveness, therefore, is humanity's greatest need; Jesus alone has authority to forgive; forgiveness leads to fellowship. In our gospel preaching, 'fellowship' is perhaps given less emphasis than it merits. It is striking how Levi, having been forgiven, is immediately brought into fellowship, not only with the Lord, but with other forgiven sinners (2:15-16). There are vertical and horizontal dimensions to forgiveness – reconciliation to God (the 'vertical') and reconciliation to one another (the 'horizontal'). It is a profound truth, that as we share in fellowship with one another, we are enjoying fellowship with God.

You will have noted from the way I have broken up the material, some overlap in the biblical text. For example, while the focus on preaching, specifically the priority of preaching, concludes in 2:1-12 with the healing of the paralytic, the next theme ('sin, forgiveness, fellowship') emerges.

This 'layering' technique is a particular literary feature of *Mark*, consistent with the compact, succinct character of the book. And we need to be attentive to Mark's technique in dividing up the text for our sermon series, aware that running too quickly with the editorial divisions suggested in our particular translation, may confuse rather than clarify.

(v) Opposition (2:1–3:6)

The theme of 'opposition' (specifically to Jesus) runs from 2:1 to 3:6 (once again note the overlap with 2:1-17). There are five counts of opposition (2:1-12, 13-17, 18-22, 23-28; 3:1-6), culminating in the sinister and stark tone of 3:6: 'Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.'

(vi) Rejection spells advance (3:7-34)

Opposition, however, can never thwart the progress of the gospel, and from 3:7-34, the dominant theme is 'rejection spells advance'. Jesus, rejected by his nation and his family (3:20-30), establishes a new order (3:13-19, 31-35).

(vii) The Kingdom of God grows through the power of the Word (4:1-34)

These early chapters find an appropriate conclusion in 4:1-34, where the dominant theme is 'the kingdom of God grows through the power of the Word'. In terms of structure, we have three parables ('sown seed' (4:

1-9, 13-20); 'growing seed' (4:26-29) and 'mustard seed' (4:30-34)) together with two short sayings of Jesus woven into the parables (4:10-12, 21-25).

What are the key teaching points? That the kingdom grows through the power of the Word. The nature of this power, however, is power through weakness and, by implication, Word ministry will appear weak. And so we are to expect discouragement as the Word is rejected (parable of the 'sown seed'), from the length of time it takes the Word to work ('growing seed') and from the fact that both the message and method look pitifully weak ('mustard seed'). As preachers, we need little convincing about the discouragements, but to read in God's Word that it's exactly what we're to expect, encourages us to press on. At least we know we're on the right track! What we do need convincing of is the promise of miracle harvest (4:8, 20, 27-29, 32), which we will see now in part, but not fully and clearly until the Last Day.

The two short sayings of Jesus (4:10-12, 21-25), woven into the text, complete the picture. They make it clear who does what in kingdom building. God's work is saving (4:10-12) – revelation is his prerogative and it always takes a miracle to see. Our work is sowing (4:21-25) – telling the truth. This brings us full circle back to John the Baptist (1:4-8). Clarity about our responsibility is truly liberating. To be clear is to see evangelism as simply telling

the truth, the whole truth, publicly proclaimed. God will reveal the truth to those he chooses. If we are tempted to think God's job is our job, then we will inevitably fail, with the result that we compromise on truth.

(viii) Listen to the Word (4:1-20)

While the dominant emphasis in chapter 4 is training, where Jesus teaches his disciples (and those who follow him) what their ministry will be like, consistent with the dual purpose of the Gospel, it would be appropriate to revisit the ground, say in 4:1-20, focusing on the response of the hearer as the Word is proclaimed.

Summarising Mark 1–4

Grasping the wider context brings clarity and simplicity to our understanding of the text. For example, having focused on the priority of preaching in Jesus' ministry (1:14–2:12, in particular 1:29–2:12), it is logical that preaching is God's primary method for growing the kingdom after Jesus has gone (3:14). Add into that the atmosphere of friction and opposition that permeates these pages, and it's no surprise that Word ministry is tough going (4:1-34).

Let me summarise how the text might appropriately be divided up for a series:

- (i) Focus on Jesus (1:1-13)*
- (ii) Commissioned into conflict (1:9-13)*

- (iii) *The power and priority of preaching (1:14–2:12)*
- (iv) *Sin, forgiveness, fellowship – the ‘ABC’ (2:1–17)*
- (v) *Opposition (2:1–3:6)*
- (vi) *Rejection spells advance (3:7–34)*
- (vii) *The Kingdom of God grows through the power of the Word (4:1–34)*
- (viii) *Listen to the Word (4:1–20)*

The Power and Priority of Preaching (1:14–2:12)

Let’s focus now in some detail on the dominant theme that runs from 1:14–2:12, which I’ve titled ‘the power and priority of preaching’. This is a long section of text, but it’s clear from the rhythm of these early chapters that Mark intends us to take this as a single unit. We must beware of sacrificing the detail of the text, but equally we need to make sure in our preaching that we don’t miss the wood for the trees!

(1) Jesus is a gospel preacher (1:14–15)

Verse 14: ‘After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”’ (1:14–15) Jesus’ public ministry begins after John the Baptist has been imprisoned, indicating that, as an activity, preaching is conducted in an atmosphere of hostility (a theme which Mark develops throughout his Gospel).

Jesus’ emergence *as a preacher* is striking! It shatters our human expectations. What we expect when the Son of God walks onto the stage of human history and begins his public ministry, is revolution! And the kind of revolution that would marshal the forces of heaven, drawing on the whole panoply of supernatural power at his disposal, to bring about a new order, a new day (which, by necessity, would bring to an end the subjugation of the Jews under the might of Rome). That is exactly what the disciples expected and wanted. It would take a miracle to readjust their thinking! Jesus does bring a revolution, but of a very different order. It is ‘other-worldly’; revolution based on power through weakness, humility, service and suffering. It is a revolution where the *principal activity is preaching!* Jesus is first and foremost a preacher.

What kind of preacher is he? What is the content of his preaching? He is a gospel preacher (literally a preacher of ‘good news’). What is the good news? It is ‘the good news of God’ (1:14c). God has broken into a sinful world to address the world’s deepest problem and need. John 3:16: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ And when Jesus says: ‘The time has come...’ (Mark 1:15a), he is, in effect, saying: ‘Here I am.’ ‘The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and

believe the good news!’ (1:15b). Jesus preached the gospel, calling people to repent and believe in him. We preach the gospel, calling people to repent and believe in him. Nothing has changed, except that Jesus preached pointing to himself, whereas we preach, pointing to him!

As preachers rightly committed to the systematic exposition of Scripture, we must be confident that the whole Word preaches the gospel of God, or put more starkly, that systematic exposition is gospel preaching. But while that is true, we need to be attentive in our preaching, to spell out the gospel, with the clarity and regularity that smacks of the character of Jesus’ preaching.

(2) The power of preaching (1:16–28)

From 1:16 through 2:12, we are taught two fundamentally important principles about preaching: first, *the power of preaching* (1:16–28) and second, *the priority of preaching* (1:19–2:12).

While the focus of the text is clearly on Jesus the preacher, the titles I have chosen are purposefully applied. My assumption (supported by this text and numerous others in the New Testament) is that Christian preaching *about* Jesus has the same power and authority as Jesus preaching. That’s quite a thought. Indeed, it’s a risky thing for preachers to say as they expound this passage! But it must be true, for my job as a preacher

is not to preach about me (other than to make clear that I can do nothing) but about Jesus. My job is not to preach my words, but God's words, for then (and only then) will the Spirit be able to arm himself with his sword and cut these words into our hearts. We must say again and again to our people, 'You have not come to hear me, or my words. You have come to hear God's Word, and meet with God's Son, Jesus Christ.' And that's a whole different proposition. Why must we keep emphasising this? Simply because the default mode of the human heart is religion – preacher and people alike so easily lapse into thinking that the preacher can do something!

*(i) Power to make disciples
(1:16-20)*

Preaching has the power to make disciples (1:16-20). Verse 17: "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him' (1:17-18). There is nothing natural about the response of the disciples to the call of Jesus. His call carries with it a supernatural grip on the human heart. How do we know? Because at once they left their life and livelihood to follow him. They abandoned their life without Christ for a life with Christ! Can that still happen? Every time the Word is preached, that potential and possibility exist.

*(ii) Power to unmask Satan
(1:21-26)*

Verse 21: 'They came to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.' Verse 23: 'a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek' (1:23-26). What is it, or more precisely, who is it, that grips the human heart in the paralysis of sin, in rebellion against God? It is Satan. Is that too strong? Is it too strong to suggest that without Christ controlling our hearts and lives, we are in the power of Satan? Later in Mark, Peter refuses to accept that Jesus must die a sacrificial death on a cross. How does Jesus respond to Peter? Mark 8:33: "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Worldly thinking is Satanic thinking, and at the heart of worldliness is unbelief. Every true convert can say, 'When the truth of the gospel invaded my heart and changed my life, what it dislodged was the

grip of Satan on my life. My allegiance and citizenship changed. I became a citizen of the kingdom of God, where before I was a citizen of the kingdom of the world.' The power of preaching unmasks and dislodges Satan!

*(iii) A different kind of
preaching (1:22, 27-28)*

Finally, true preaching has the ring of authority! Verse 22: 'The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.' Verse 27: 'The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching – and with authority!"' (1:27a). No preacher can make his preaching authoritative. God gives authority to faithful preaching (faithfulness to the Word) from faithful preachers (Godly men of prayer).

*(3) The priority of
preaching (1:29–2:12)*

The second big lesson concerns the priority of preaching. Preaching was Jesus' priority. Again, the generic application is sound. Like Jesus, preaching must be the priority of the church, nationally and locally, and the priority in the life and work of the Christian minister.

Mark takes us through four logical steps in order to make his point: 'priorities challenged' (1:29-34), 'priorities set' (1:35-39), 'priorities tested' (1:40-45) and 'priorities demonstrated' (2:1-12).

*My job is not to
preach my words,
but God's words*

*(i) Priorities challenged
(1:29-34)*

Jesus' reputation (we assume his command of supernatural powers) had spread (1:28). The result? Verse 32: 'That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door...'. It is clear from the text where the priority of the crowd lies. Their understandable desire is for physical healing; they see Jesus as a miracle healer. One of the characteristics of Mark is that the 'crowd' embodies a suffocating atmosphere (see e.g., 2:2; 4:1; 9:14-29).

(ii) Priorities set (1:35-39)

Picture the scene next morning. Peter gets up, pulls back the curtains, and seeing the crowds beginning to gather at first light, rubs his hands together, as he anticipates status and prestige as Jesus' right-hand man! But there's a big problem. The healer is nowhere to be seen. Jesus has gone! Verse 36: 'Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"' (1:36-37). The Greek here fizzles with tension – they are angry with Jesus at his dereliction of duty.

What is Jesus doing? Jesus has taken time out to pray (1:35). Jesus prays three times in Mark, all at points of crisis. On two of these occasions, the crisis is in his own ministry (here and in Gethsemane (14:32-42)). The third occasion, he prays for

the disciples in their crisis of understanding (6:45-46). The result of his prayer here in Mark 1? Jesus is clear on his priority: 'Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come.' Jesus' priority is proclamation of the gospel – spiritual healing, rather than physical healing. The dilemma that Jesus faced was not between the good and the bad, but between the best and the good. And that is a daily dilemma for the Christian minister, to resolve to make preaching their priority, often at the expense of what are good and laudable ministry activities. Such conviction will always carry a cost.

(iii) Priorities tested (1:40-45)

This next episode indicates that Jesus' conviction to preach over healing evidences no lack of compassion on his part. Faced with the desperate plight of the leper, 'filled with compassion' Jesus heals him (1:41). But sensing the likely consequences, Jesus sternly charges the man not to tell anyone except the priest (1:43-44). The man of course cannot keep it to himself, and we can empathise as 'he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news' (1:45a). 'As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but

stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere' (1:45b).

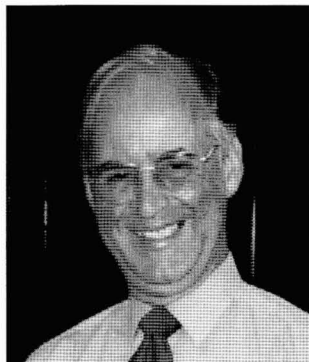
*(iv) Priorities demonstrated
(2:1-12)*

In 2:1-12, there is a clear resolution as Jesus emphatically demonstrates his priorities. Chapter 2, verse 1: 'A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them' (2:1-2). And then the drama of the scene as the man is lowered down through the roof! The dust settles, the crowd falls silent, what will Jesus say? What Jesus says is exactly what we expect him to say. 'Son, your sins are forgiven' (2:5b). It is the logical priority, as Jesus deals with the man's greatest need. The fact that Jesus then heals the man is in order to demonstrate that he has the authority to forgive sins (2:10).

(4) Conclusion

These early chapters of *Mark* lay down fundamental principles about the kingdom of God. We are given the message and the method. At the heart is the power and priority of gospel preaching. It is only the inspired Word that will convince us to preach the Word, with the implicit warning that if we don't make preaching our priority, then our churches cannot grow.

*God gives authority
to faithful preach-
ing from faithful
preachers*



Bob Fyall interviews Agnes Brough

One of the great pleasures in the work of the ministry is to talk with someone who is clear and unambiguous about her role and a good role model for others, especially younger women who are uncertain about what their own ministry is to be. Agnes Brough, a valued member of the ministry team at St George's-Tron, speaks about her work and reflects on Gospel ministry.

Bob: Please give a brief account of your background.

Agnes: I was born into a Christian home (a manse, in fact) and was brought up to trust the Lord. Scripture Union events and university Christian Union were significant in helping me to grow in my faith as a teenager and young adult. I've spent most of my adult life in the south east of England and returned to Scotland three-and-a-half years ago to take up a post at St George's-Tron Church in Glasgow.

Bob: How did you come to Christian ministry and how were you trained?

Agnes: From the first seed of an idea of teaching children the Bible full-time to first being

employed took more than ten years. In between times I worked as a civil servant in London and got involved with Sunday school, youth group and house groups with my local church and led SU summer camps each year. I also managed a bit of the Moore College correspondence course in theology. Leaders and others at church recognised a teaching gift and encouraged me to pursue full-time Christian work.

I trained first as a primary school teacher – because it would be good experience and because I realised that I was unlikely to remain in full-time Christian work until retirement. I regard my eight years in a busy office in London and two years in schools as an important part of my training for full-time ministry. After

teacher training I did the Cornhill Training Course in London which provided wonderfully practical training in the foundational task of handling God's Word. I wouldn't be without it.

Bob: Say a bit about your present post at St George's-Tron.

Agnes: My work has changed each year (this is my fourth year in post). I oversee our children's and youth work, work with students and am involved with evangelism amongst women in the city centre. On a week-by-week or month-by-month level that might involve teaching a group of 14-18s on a Friday night, co-leading a small Bible study on a Thursday night, going through Christianity Explored

with an individual during their lunch-break, reading Philippians with a sixth year girl, writing notes for Bible study and youth leaders, planning leaders' training and having coffee or lunch with city centre contacts or students. I've also organised the women's ministry stream for the new Scottish Cornhill course.

Bob: In days of great confusion what do you believe is the true pattern for women's ministry?

Agnes: I think the Bible is clear that God has given equal status and dignity to men and women but different roles within the church. We cannot dismiss the distinctions we find in the New Testament as cultural since Paul argues for them from God's order in creation. Since that is God's pattern I am convinced that it is best for women (despite what society tells us), best for men and best for the Gospel. It follows that it is not right for women to be in overall church leadership; but nor is it right to limit women's areas of service to flowers and tea (though those are both glorious ways of serving the body of Christ). Unfortunately, where there is little Bible teaching exercised outside the pulpit on a Sunday, the contribution that women have to make will be missed. I would love to see lots more women trained and equipped to read one-to-one with a younger Christian woman, to mentor girls involved in serving in their Christian Union, to teach our

children and young people, to organise a Christianity Explored course in their workplace.

Bob: What can we learn, particularly but not exclusively in the area of women's ministry, from our evangelical friends in other countries (including England and Australia)?

Agnes: I haven't visited many other countries though if anyone fancies funding a study trip to Australia, I'd be happy to oblige. I've been to Nairobi a number of times on a Project Timothy trip to help with Bible training at an Anglican theological college. I'm always challenged by the students' devotion to the Lord, prayerfulness and contentment in the face of great hardships – a reminder to me to have a grateful heart and not to forget that I have a ministry of prayer as well as of the Word.

I've got most experience of the scene in England having lived there for the best part of 15 years. One of the distinctives of conservative evangelical churches there is the number of lay people involved in Word ministry and doing it well. There's more training of lay people – church leaders who see their role as not just teaching but teaching others to teach. That seems to me to take the pattern of ministry in Ephesians 4 seriously. It's not a situation we can conjure up overnight but, with the help of the likes of Cornhill in Scotland and many other great resources,

one we should aim for even if it is 'slowly by slowly' as they say in Kenya. One of the by-products of greater lay involvement in Word ministry is that women are much more involved in teaching roles, which is as it should be.

Many conservative evangelical churches in England have recruited women to their staff teams, making the most of women's gifts in that way too.

I've appreciated the have-a-go attitude of folk I've encountered from England and the US. It doesn't come naturally to me but the willingness to try something which might work or might not is really helpful. I think we'd do a whole lot more and do a whole lot more right if we were willing to risk having a go.

Bob: What are your hopes for the future development of Gospel ministry in Scotland?

Agnes: To see many more people – men and women – in all of our churches equipped to teach God's Word whether that's one-to-one, small groups, youth groups, or to whole congregations. To see more young men, well-taught and well-equipped, heading for full-time ministry.

To see the Cornhill Training Course in Scotland established and growing, and producing a new crop of well-trained men and women for service in the church each year.

Preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ

Ephesians 3:1-13

Bob Fyall

This is the substance of a sermon preached at Jonathan de Groot's ordination and induction to St Stephen's Church of Scotland, Comely Bank, Edinburgh. The passage, especially the phrase 'to preach... the unsearchable riches of Christ' was very significant in Jonathan's call to the ministry. I have omitted personal and local references.

William Still said that no-one should enter the ministry if they can possibly do anything else, and that is a reminder of the daunting nature of the task as well as of the divine compulsion which lies at the heart of any genuine call. This is seen in the Old Testament prophets, perhaps most memorably in Jeremiah: 'If I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is like a fire in my heart, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot' (20:9). Such a compulsion is a mark of Paul as well and the powerful emotion in this passage grows from his longing that people would know Christ. Wesley summed up his ministry in the words 'I offered Christ to them.' That must be the essence

of any Gospel ministry. But what does it mean to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ?

Two great themes run through this passage as we try to explore this phrase:

1. It is the subject of preaching

Paul here sweeps through the big picture from creation to new creation as he unfolds the wonders of the Gospel. There is always a sense of spaciousness and of grappling with big truths when the Gospel is preached. That is what preaching is about. If I want to hear platitudes and anecdotes I can go for a haircut or take a ride in a taxi. Preaching is an awesome task because by it Christ is revealed. In this passage there are two par-

ticular great truths about the unsearchable riches of Christ.

(a) *The Bible is a unity*

The whole Bible is the Gospel, and thus if we are to preach Christ faithfully we must preach the Bible in all its fullness. This is not contradicted by v. 5 'which was not made' known to men in other generations'. This Gospel had been promised by the prophets (e.g. Rom. 1:2; 3: 21) and the promise to Abraham was that in him all peoples on earth would be blessed (Gen. 12: 3). What had not been revealed was that both Jews and Gentiles would become part of the body of Christ and it was given to Paul as apostle to the Gentiles to be steward of this mystery

and the first to have the privilege of unfolding its wonders.

Paul has a unique place in salvation history and we are not apostles. Yet it is our calling to preach the apostolic Gospel and the wonder of belonging to Christ and being part of his people throughout the centuries and across the world. This is spelled out in more detail in v. 6 where the wonder of being in Christ is developed in three expressions. We are heirs with all God's people in Old as well as New Testament times because of the indwelling Spirit (see ch. 1: 14); we are part of Christ's body and we are sharers of the promise of Christ. So we can confidently preach Christ from the whole Bible without straying from its great message because that great message is Christ himself and how by his death and resurrection he has fulfilled the ancient promises and opened the kingdom of heaven to all who believe.

This is of great practical significance. It means that we never lack anything to say when preaching since we have a whole Bible. When I was a theology student one of my supervisors told me that it does not take long to preach through the preachable parts of the Bible. It was hardly surprising that he had little to say. If we depend on our own resources to sustain our preaching ministry we will soon run out of steam, but we will never exhaust the Bible and, indeed,

*If we depend on our own resources
to sustain our preaching ministry
we will soon run out of steam,
but we will never exhaust the Bible*

as the years pass will wish we had longer to explore more of these unsearchable riches.

(b) We will realise our own weakness

In v. 8 Paul plays down his own part by calling himself 'less than the least of all God's people'. Paul here is not indulging in false modesty but rather he is overwhelmed by the grace of God which has not only saved him but called and fitted him to preach the Gospel. There is a sense here of both the inexhaustibility of the Gospel; it is 'unsearchable' and we will never fully understand it. Yet Paul says he makes it plain, which has the sense of bringing to light, of opening eyes. This is always the task of the preacher because people's eyes are blinded by the god of this world. This is exactly what happened to the two disciples on the Emmaus road when they were joined by the risen Lord. He did not say 'you don't need the Bible now, you have me'. Rather he showed them that without the Scriptures they would not understand him. As he opened the Scriptures (Luke 24: 32) their eyes were opened (v. 31)

and their hearts burned and they hurried back with the message. That is our task today as we proclaim not ourselves but Christ.

2. God's wisdom is made known to the cosmic powers

The Gospel is a big message covering the whole human story and speaking to every human situation. But it is bigger even than that for it also affects 'the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms' (v. 10). Here he uses another striking phrase 'the manifold wisdom of God'. Just as the unsearchable riches of Christ are to be preached to the world so God's wisdom is to be made known to the cosmic powers. This is ultimately due to God but, in his grace, it is effected 'through the church'. The existence of the redeemed community is an evidence of that wisdom of God unfolded in chapter 1, beginning before the creation of the world but shown by the raising of Jesus from the dead and his exaltation far above all principalities and powers.

Two things are worth noting:

*God's purpose,
which was planned before time,
has already been accomplished in Christ
and its final outworking is certain.*

*(a) The resurrection means
that the kingdom is already
irreversible*

Resurrection is not something tagged on at the end; resurrection means that the judgement has already begun and that the evil cosmic powers have been given notice that their time is up. It is rather like in summer when you go boating on a lake and are given a number. After a while the attendant will call out 'Come in number 25, your time is up.' There is always someone who ignores this, but eventually they have to obey the instruction. So it is with Satan and his minions, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ has called time on them. They will and do resist ever more furiously but they cannot win and the Gospel cannot be stopped. This is made plain in v. 12: God's purpose which was planned before time has already been accomplished in Christ and its final outworking is certain.

This means that all true Christian living and Christian ministry looks to the future. It is sometimes disparagingly said that someone is too heavenly minded to be any earthly use.

I have never in my life met anyone like that; for most of us the problem is that we are so earthly minded that we are of little use either to earth or heaven.

Indeed, the more firmly we believe that Christ will one day wind up the affairs of this world and bring in a better one the more urgent it is that we engage in all lawful and worthy activities until he comes.

(b) We can pray effectively

Because the risen Christ has defeated the cosmic powers we can approach God confidently through him (v. 12). Our ministry needs to be carried out in the context and atmosphere of prayer. The Gospel lays the foundation for unhindered access to God. We know that since our great High Priest is in heaven our prayers are guaranteed a hearing through him, and Paul is to give us a great example of such a prayer in vv. 14-19 of this chapter.

The need for prayer is given greater point by Paul's reference to his sufferings, which can be greatly discouraging. He is urging his readers and us to see everything in the light of the com-

ing glory and in the whole sweep of God's purposes. Prayer keeps us in touch with that unseen realm where the risen Christ already reigns and will one day visibly be seen to be Lord.

3. What now?

In the light of that glorious Gospel we take courage and continue building Gospel churches on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. We have the sense of being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, many still on earth but most now in heaven, and the assurance that until the Lord returns others will join in the great task of building what will last into eternity.

Because that is ultimately what ministry is about. W. P. Manson, Professor of New Testament at New College, Edinburgh in the middle years of the twentieth century, used to ask each new class at the beginning of the session what was the purpose of the ministry. Many answers would be given and many of these would be good. However he always gave his own answer: 'The purpose of the ministry is to fit people for heaven.' That is still true today.

'Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power at work among us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen' (Eph. 3: 20-21).

IVP Introduction to the Bible: Story, themes and interpretation

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This is a new introduction to the Bible by a team of evangelical scholars who are all interested and involved not only in scholarship but in teaching and communicating the message of Scripture. It is a laudable endeavour to make the fruits of scholarship more widely known and is especially aimed at those who are Christian but need to be taught and to those not Christian who have a genuine desire to find out about the Bible.

The book has a clear structure. After a useful introduction by the editor, there are general chapters on the Bible as a whole and on each testament. These range widely over such matters as different translations, daily life and society, Paul's Letters and the use of the Gospels today. Each book is analysed and their literary genres outlined. The book has a number of strengths. Inevitably, in a multi-author volume, individual readers will have preferences and find some sections more helpful than others. Yet the style is lucid, and while considerable scholarship lies behind all the contributions this does not become obtrusive and the overall design is kept clearly in mind. Unlike some

older introductions there is a welcome emphasis on genre and on theology while matters of background are not ignored. There is, on the whole, a robust defence of historical accuracy and theological relevance. Some specific sections that this reviewer found particularly helpful were: Ch. 4 on the OT historical books; Ch. 11 on the NT Letters and the final chapter on Reading the Bible. On the whole the material is presented engagingly with a great deal of information provided with a light touch. This is a good place for the non-specialist to begin and will also be helpful to the more experienced in giving an up-to-date snapshot of what evangelical scholarship is saying. There are, however, some reservations I would want to express. The section on the Old Testament and Christ does not do full justice to the Christocentric nature of the whole of Scripture, especially in the prophetic books which not only have specific prophecies but the whole eschatological thrust which is at the heart of the prophetic word. (For a fuller treatment see *The Christ of the Prophets* by O. Palmer Robertson.) Similarly the treatment of the individual prophets in the Book of the Twelve lacks a sense of their major significance. There is an occasional tendency to understate the strength of the conservative case, e.g. on the authorship of Isaiah and Daniel.

Book Reviews

These reservations apart, the book is a welcome resource for those who want to explore further the riches of the Bible.

Bob Fyall, Edinburgh

What's the Bible all about?

Ian Paul and Philip Jensen
Grove Books Limited, Cambridge, 2006. 28 pp. £2.95
ISBN-13: 9781851746248
ISBN-10: 1851746242

Several years ago I wrote a short course covering the story of the entire Bible in five weeks. I've never repeated it, but the interest shown by church members at the time should spur me on to action – especially now that I have this little booklet as a resource. Like the well-known brand of varnish, it does what it says on the cover: it tells us what the Bible is all about.

It begins by asserting the value of seeing the big picture of the Bible story; and by dividing Scripture into six 'acts', à la Tom Wright. It then proceeds to tell the story from Genesis to Revelation, with summaries of the psalms, prophets and epistles. I liked the idea of keeping the Scripture references to the margin rather than within the text so that the flow of the story is not interrupted while the reader is never left wondering which part of Scripture is being told. There are questions for reflection at the end. Stylistic considerations apart, I suspect that almost any reader of this journal would have come up with more or less the same

Book Reviews

content. Its value does not lie in novelty or invention, but rather quite simply in its existence. For all the Bible handbooks lying on my shelves, I have nothing so short or succinct. I showed the booklet to a few members of my congregation. All found it helpful. It would make a good gift to new members, or the basis of a 'big picture' sermon.

Ian M. Watson, Kirkmuirhill

The Cross of Christ

John Stott

IVP, Nottingham, 2006. 460

pp. £14.99

ISBN-13: 9781844741557

ISBN-10: 1844741559

This classic work was first published in 1985 and then with the study guide by David Stone in 1989. Reprinted many times it now appears in this handsome 20th Anniversary edition. All readers of this journal will have had experience of Stott's magisterial command of his material, faithfulness to Scripture, pastoral wisdom, theological acumen and his commitment to the preaching, teaching and living of the Biblical Gospel. Here we have a powerful and moving statement of what has been the crowning passion of his life: to preach Christ crucified. The book is organised in four sections. The first Approaching the Cross demonstrates the centrality of the theme and why the cross was necessary. The second The Heart of the Cross examines

the different approaches to the atonement and the absolute centrality of the self-substitution of God. The third The Achievement of the Cross deals with the benefits of salvation and how these have been variously understood. The fourth Living under the Cross unfolds its implications for the redeemed community. A final section The Pervasive Influence of the Cross takes the letter to the Galatians as a comprehensive summary of the significance of the cross. A bibliography, study guide and three useful indexes complete the book. The theology of the book is profound but expressed with Stott's characteristic lucidity. His exposition of propitiation is comprehensive and uncompromising and should be pondered carefully by those tempted to be seduced by ephemeral views. Similarly his analysis of other views of the atonement is fair and lucid. He also has useful comments on the relationship of the cross and healing. His treatment of Biblical passages is a model of careful exposition and pointed application. Particular examples are the treatment of Isaiah 53, of Job and of Galatians. An examination of the index of Biblical references will show how widely he has cast his net and how central is the theme. The book is marked by a deep devotion to Christ and a warm and robust faith. This is a book which will not only inform but inspire. This is shown both by the

wealth of personal reflection and a skilful marshalling of the views of others. Stott is continually asking us to respond to the practical implications of true doctrine. Many will already have a copy of this book. If you are a preacher this will be an indispensable resource; if you want a lucid defence of the doctrine of penal substitution you will be hard-pressed to find a better one; if you want to reflect more deeply on the wondrous cross this is also the book for you. Like all good theology, this book has not dated over the years and will send you back to your Bible with greater understanding and a warm heart.

Bob Fyall, Edinburgh

Communion Services

Robin Knowles Wallace

Abingdon Press, Nashville,

2006. x+99 pp. £4.99

ISBN-13: 9780687498369

ISBN-10: 0687498368

Pastoral Prayers in Public Places

F. Belton Joyner Jr

Abingdon Press, Nashville,

2006. xv+80 pp. £4.99

ISBN-13: 9780687495672

ISBN-10: 0687495679

Both books belong to a series called 'Just in Time', which, according to the blurb, 'offers brief, practical resources of immediate help for pastors at an affordable price'. Brief and affordable they certainly are, but what about 'practical' and 'of immediate help'? On the face of it, books of this nature

on Communion and Prayer would qualify as 'practical', for each is concerned to put into the hands of busy pastors a liturgical resource that can be picked off the shelf and used as it stands. However, one has to bear in mind where they come from. They are published by Abingdon Press, a United Methodist publishing house based in Nashville, Tennessee, and thus there are two gaps to cross: the theological gap and the general cultural gap. A degree of translation work is required which makes them of less immediate use. The book by Wallace on Communion has an introductory chapter and this is probably the place where the theological gap is widest for readers of this journal. For example, in a section on leftover elements (the first time I have ever read such a section in a book on Communion; I would like to see more, but with better theological rationale) several possible ways of dealing with them are suggested, one of which is to take the blessed bread and wine to those who are ill and the like. However, by that time, for us, the bread and wine are no longer special. While there are good arguments for Home Communion celebrations, the practice suggested not only rests on a different theology, but it also gives impetus to an already too prevalent reverence for sacramental leftovers. The rest of the book journeys through the Christian Year with

a variety of liturgies for occasions such as Maundy Thursday and Pentecost. It also pictures different settings like Retreats and Weddings. The individual liturgies provide a range of word-forms that could profitably be included in personally constructed orders of service, but I doubt if too many of them could be imported wholesale. To work out if you would get value for money I'm afraid you will have to buy the book – but what's a fiver! The contents page of Joyner's book on Prayer is a reminder that prayer encompasses the whole of life. As one who has conducted the funeral of a hamster (buried in a 'coffin case' for specs) and the blessing of a Brownie flag, I was glad to see the breadth of the situations included. Don't laugh! This is a serious point. Our God reigns over the whole of life and is interested in every aspect of our lives, so why should we not pray within these settings? Again, we will find forms of words that can be used but the cultural gap means that some 'translation' work will be required along the way. Brief, affordable and practical, but these books will be of less immediate use than they would be across the Pond. However, those who find themselves offering prayers and conducting Communion in a range of situations could find them of some use.

Jared Hay, Balerno

Book Reviews

Punching Above His Weight
– A Review Article on

The God Delusion

Richard Dawkins

Bantam Press, London, 2006.

416 pp. £20.00

ISBN-13: 9780593055489

ISBN-10: 0593055489

In my distant and no doubt mis-spent youth one of the more foolish things I did was to take up the sport of boxing. Apart from a nose that bends inappropriately the only lasting memento I have of that time is the recollection of the incessant mantra of our trainer 'Train hard, fight easy'. It was in light of this that I approached *The God Delusion*. Sparring with Richard Dawkins would seem to be excellent training for the real work of apologetics, in the houses, streets and bars of the parish.

Charles Symoni professor of the public understanding of science at the university of Oxford and pin-up boy of the Secular Society, Richard Dawkins has become the flag-bearer for a particular type of aggressive, even strident, non-belief. It is not enough for Dawkins that he has a different understanding of reality from religious believers; he has a compulsion to crush, even eradicate belief in the supernatural of any kind.

This book is not specifically designed to be anti-Christian but anti-religion. Dawkins does not just reject the God of the Bible, 'too easy a target', but something he terms religion. Unfortunately

Book Reviews

he is unable to distinguish any differences within the concept 'religion'. The Church of England or the Taliban, they are all part of the same parcel. No-one can accuse Dawkins of lacking significant purpose. It is his intention to eradicate the 'spectacularly weak' arguments for God's existence. However, in 400 pages he devotes less than half a dozen pages to Anselm and barely three pages to Thomas Aquinas. It is interesting that Dawkins quotes his wife, Lalla Ward the ex-Dr Who actress, more often than he does any individual theologian or philosopher. The author most often quoted in *The God Delusion* is, yes you've guessed it, Richard Dawkins. Dawkins takes the five proofs of Aquinas, which he describes as 'vacuous', as attempted proofs of the God of the Bible, he then 'demonstrates' that they do not indicate the God of Scripture and congratulates himself on having smashed the theological arguments for the existence of God. To Dawkins, the ontological argument is 'infantile' and 'dialectical prestidigitation', this without taking the trouble to identify the defect in its logic. In his breathtaking ignorance of philosophy Dawkins seems blissfully unaware that, although medieval in origin, this argument comes in sophisticated modern forms that are not so easy to refute. Shirking the intellectual hard work Dawkins prefers to tackle

straw men. Apart from rare 'sophisticated believers' such as John Spong and Richard Holloway he lives in a world in which all believers are obscurantist, reason-denying fundies. He takes childish glee in quoting hate emails from obviously disturbed, far-out Christians. Unfortunately he continually gives the deliberate impression that they are representative of the millions of mainstream Christians who wisely never give him a second thought. Professor Dawkins should learn that trawling the internet for silly statements from snake handlers in Texas does not equate to scholarly research or serious debate. It can be amusing when Dawkins mocks fundamentalist imbecilities; it is less so when he questions the sincerity of serious scientists, like the late Stephen Jay Gould, doyen of evolutionary theorists, who have the temerity to disagree with him about religion. Likewise the recipients of the Templeton Prize, (including such as T. F. Torrance, George McLeod and John Polkinghorne) are stigmatised as intellectually dishonest, and probably venal as well. Perhaps Dawkins sinks to his lowest when he accuses Richard Swinburne, philosopher of religion and science at Oxford, of attempting to justify the Holocaust when what Swinburne was attempting was to reconcile the existence of great evil with a loving God.

Dawkins' resort to abuse and his failure to engage with real argument is understandable as he states categorically that theology is not even a subject. Instead of attempting to interact with and refute the doctrine of the atonement Dawkins merely rants that it is 'vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent', he also twice describes this 'tortuously nasty theory' as 'barking mad'. This overwhelming ignorance of and contempt for theology is staggering in someone who claims to be reducing to rubble the arguments for God's existence. If a Christian were to write a book attempting to destroy the very basis of science whilst at the same time declaring that physics and chemistry were not even subjects worthy of study, and had based his research on the *Boy's Book of Big Bangs and Nasty Smells*, he would be the subject of scorn. Yet this, in effect, is what Dawkins has done. This book is not so much a serious discussion as a 400-page rant. An easy read, but not a profitable one. Dawkins eschews the normal scholarly discipline of using primary sources. His argument that the Bible is selfish, teaching that we should do good only to the in-group (Jews in the Old Testament, other Christians in the New Testament) is based on a single paper written by anthropologist John Hartung. Might it not have been more useful, in an attack on belief, to have gone to a primary source and read

the Old Testament regulations regarding treatment of strangers, or the New Testament teachings of Jesus such as the Sermon on the Mount or, if that smacks too much of theology, just the parable of the Samaritan? In attempting to dismiss the idea that one has to have a concept of God in order to live a good life Dawkins argues that believers have done great evil in the world. Unfortunately no-one could disagree with this assertion. However, true to form Dawkins over-eggs the pudding: according to him even Hitler was a believer. To argue that Hitler's views and actions were shaped by his Roman Catholic upbringing, and the continuing vestiges of those beliefs, is an argument so extreme that it would be difficult to find even on the furthest shores of bigotry on the Protestant lunatic fringe. To argue that supposed 'religious wars' have been purely religious in origin is dangerous infantilism. Even wars such as the Crusades had significant economic and social components. The great failure of the church in supposed 'religious wars' has been not that belief was the sole cause of the wars but that we sanctioned what was going to happen anyway. We should hang our heads in shame that the church has become so allied with and corrupted by the world that it was, and still is, not Christian enough to withstand its demands.

We develop our community identity from many sources – land, possessions, descent, political outlook, literature – and find in them a sense of belonging. When there is a point of tension between communities all these identities flare into conflict. To claim that religion bears all the blame is simply foolish bigotry which ignores the facts. To imagine that the ethno-political conflict in Northern Ireland would disappear with the removal of religion from the equation is just bar-room nonsense. The Holocaust was not the result of Hitler's supposed Roman Catholicism but was, amongst other things, the outcome of insane ideas of ethnic purity developed from social Darwinism, allied to perceived injustices following Versailles and economic hardship following the Depression. If we go along with Dawkins' simplistic interpretation of cultural conflict we condemn ourselves to total failure in trying to understand how in Islamic fundamentalism religious identity is being used to carve out positions of power in a time of rapid social and economic change. Dawkins' secularist fundamentalism can do nothing but increase the potential for conflict in a rapidly polarising world. He asserts that Stalin was an atheist and Hitler probably wasn't. Whether or not this is true is ultimately unimportant, the bottom line in this part of Dawkins' argument is that whilst

Book Reviews

believers do evil in the name of God, atheists don't do evil things in the name of atheism. His blinkers are extraordinary. Stalin, the greatest mass murderer in history, committed his crimes in the name of, and in pursuit of, a self-avowedly atheist state. Pol Pot slaughtered his countrymen in an attempt to recreate Cambodia from Day One as an atheist state. Dawkins rightly condemns as 'unspeakable vandalism', the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Yet in face of the wholesale destruction of churches and religious artefacts in the USSR in the name of atheism he can still blithely declare he 'does not believe there is an atheist in the world', who would do the equivalent of the Taliban. The list, if we wished to play Dawkins' irrelevant game, could be endless. Swap the Inquisition for the Great Terror, the Albigensian Crusade for the Gulag? There is trenchant criticism of fundamentalism, but no searching examination of the globalising capitalism which creates much of the conditions in which fundamentalism breeds amongst the rejected and powerless. Dawkins has a handy explanation for the ills of the world: from the child abuse of teaching children about Jesus to the continual conflict which scars humanity, it is all the fault of religion. He would rather play his strident tune on a one-string violin than enter the more complex world of harmony and counterpoint.

Book Reviews

Dawkins is an old-fashioned modernist for whom reason is the use of logic within a framework of naive realism, believing that human learning takes the form of direct correspondence between the external world and the epistemological judgement. As we have seen, if we do wish to engage in conversation with Dawkins on these evidentialist terms, we find that he actually refuses to engage in debate: evidence contrary to his position is steadfastly ignored. In his determination to find a single cause of all problems and refusal to entertain contrary evidence Dawkins becomes the Mohammed Al-Fayed of militant secularism. This forces us to ask what would, starting from his premise, constitute 'proof' of the existence of God? It is difficult to imagine anything, other than the Holy Spirit, breaking through the hard shell of his egocentricity. For Dawkins there is an absolute dichotomy between faith and reason, both of which exist in watertight compartments: faith is always blind faith with no taint of reason, and reason becomes less than reason if faith is allowed to exist. Dawkins' contempt for Christians, for that is what it amounts to, is the product not of a thought-out philosophical position taking into account modern thought, but of a particular outlook. This is not merely the outpouring of an epistemologically naive scientific rationalist. Dawkins is

representative of a certain type of comfortable middle-class cultural liberalism which is so secure in its prejudices that it can ignore the Derridas, Marions, Moltmanns, and Ricoeurs of this world, thinkers secular and Christian, who wrestle with meaning and purpose in life and find an important place for religion in epistemology. Derrida, a non-believer in any terms recognised by the readers of RJCM who elicits a knee-jerk reaction from evangelicals who have never read his work, showed the liberal establishment that Enlightenment 'reason' was to a great extent a historical construction, a more scrupulous account of which would have to include a great deal more about faith and context. It is easy to imagine Dawkins taking his place in the dinner party sketch in Bremner, Bird and Fortune. Liberal certitude takes the place of analysis, political correctness that of ethics and the exchange of comfortable self-congratulation that of searching self-examination. The secular Ten Commandments Dawkins recommends for us are merely a series of liberal platitudes, and given another fifty years will be replaced by another set of platitudes fitting that cultural setting. For Dawkins ethics are a matter of an ever-fluctuating moral *Zeitgeist*: we are reminded of the Brad Pitt character in *Twelve Monkeys* who declares, 'There's no right, no wrong, only public opinion.'

Following the example of Joe Louis' 'Bum of the Month Club', boxing managers try to arrange undemanding opponents for young fighters. Easy fights build up confidence and get a quick payday. In apologetic terms Dawkins is part of the Club. Michelle Bunting in *The Guardian* described an earlier work of Dawkins as 'a piece of intellectually lazy polemic'. Dawkins hasn't improved with time. The *God Delusion* can be used as a confidence-builder for Christians: if this is the best the secular world can do we need not worry. It can also be recommended as a textbook for students demonstrating how not to do apologetics. This book will only convince those who wish to be convinced.

*Campbell Campbell-Jack,
Glasgow*

Changing Mission: Learning from the Newer Churches

Stuart Murray

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Peterborough, 2006. xi+153 pp. £8.99
ISBN-13: 9780851693057
ISBN-10: 0851693059

In *Changing Mission: Learning from the Newer Churches*, Stuart Murray provides a valuable contribution to the ways in which people are exploring what it is to be 'church' in contemporary society. Everything is changing – so what is God calling the churches to be and to do today? Written as part of the 'Building Bridges of Hope' series

(including *Changing Church* – written by Jeanne Hinton and *Changing Communities* – written by Jeanne Hinton and Peter B. Price), *Changing Mission* focuses on what can be learned from new expressions of church and from church-planting initiatives. Murray had been asked to bring an Anabaptist perspective to these crucial issues of our day. Whether you are part of an established church or an emerging church there will be something for you in this book: to challenge, inspire and stimulate you to new ways of creative thinking, engagement and communication. The newer or ‘emerging churches’ are part of a fast-moving and changing scene – Murray says that by the time the book is published it will be out of date. That makes it hard to pin down, and Murray recognises the difficulty of clear definitions. In our fast-changing context, where the breakdown of modernity and of Christendom have given huge mission challenges to the church, Murray is one among many exploring ways of being church that are more relevant to today’s context. The first few chapters are tentative descriptions of the fast-moving scene, factors that make change happen or be essential, the place of church planting, a ‘how we have got to where we are’. Murray notes that newer forms of church have come out of three different concerns

– mission (inherited church not connecting with large numbers of society); fellowship (the absence of real community in the inherited model); and worship (the irrelevance and paucity of traditional services to meet today’s world). He gives two chapters to the first of these, then one each to the other two, and closes with a chapter drawing out lessons that inherited churches can learn from the emerging church movement. Those familiar with his work will be aware of the comprehensiveness of his coverage, his tendency to provide insightful lists of points on a subject, his clear preference for both the Anabaptist tradition and for new forms of church, his personal familiarity with what is going on in many different settings. Seeker-oriented church, purpose-driven church, cell church, alternative worship, table church, cafe church, pub church, cyber church, youth church, workplace church are only some of the many models he looks at. He reckons that both inherited and emerging models are needed, that they can learn from and complement one another. He poses questions for each and urges continuing conversation – because we are to work for the same goal of making Christ more known and better followed. ‘We need a “decade of experimentation” not another “decade of evangelism”, and we need to document and learn from successes and failures. In post-Christendom the gospel

Book Reviews

must be incarnated authentically, and this will require diverse expressions of church’ (p. 138). Yet since the emerging church scene is so fledgling it remains too early to say what will last, and so far the emerging church is dependent on the support of the inherited. So while the book is largely descriptive and tentative in its suggestions it is also passionate. There is a Great Commission to get on with and we best get on with that through seeking to be a relevant church.

Gordon Palmer, East Kilbride

Hearing Beyond the Words: How to Become a Listening Pastor

Emma J. Justes
Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN,
2006. 115 pp. £8.99
ISBN-13: 9780687494996
ISBN-10: 0687494990

How many of us have not been thrown when a glance at the clock on the mantelpiece or at our watch has prompted the remark, ‘Sorry! I’m taking up your time.’ Or think of the times we have tried to fast forward by a few minutes a story we have heard many times before word for word, only to be told, ‘Yes, but before that...’. And we have all been guilty of the clichéd response, the far away look, and the body language, which indicate that we are not really listening to what we are being told. The problem with listening, says Emma Justes, is that it is ‘*easy not to do*.’ Effective

Book Reviews

listening is hard work and needs to be learned and practised. To help us master the art, she includes at the end of each chapter exercises which are designed to improve our competency.

Justes draws a connection between the practice of hospitality and the act of listening, and finds models for effective listening in the examples of hospitality which we see in Scripture. She argues that the marks of genuine hospitality – vulnerability, humility, availability, and reciprocity, as well as obedience to the biblical command to practise hospitality – are also characteristic of true listening. The parallels are explored in a series of chapters which are full of insights into what takes place in the encounter between speaker and listener.

The book has much to say about what is required if we are to listen to one another across ethnic, cultural, generational, and gender barriers. More particularly, true listening is seen as a key component of effective evangelism, and as a necessary tool in handling conflict in the church.

Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* remarks that ‘many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life...’. For that reason

above all others, this book ought to be required reading for all ministers, elders, pastoral visitors, and Christian counsellors.

David J. C. Easton, Quothquan
